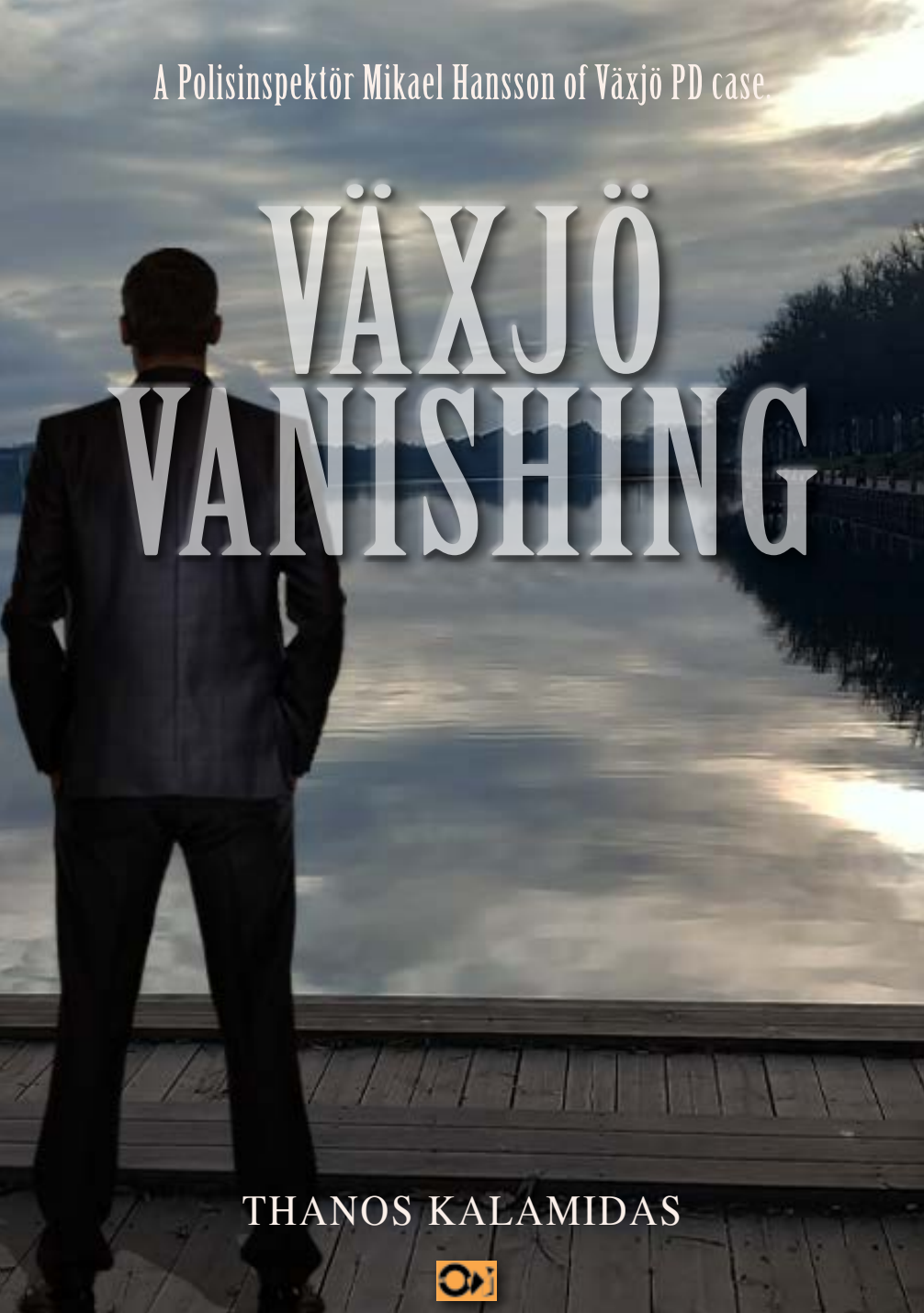
A Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson of Växjö PD case.

VÄXJÖ VANISHING



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Thanos Kalamidas

Växjö Vanishing

A Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson of Växjö Police Department case.

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The fire didn't just burn. It ate. It started with the draperies licking the heavy velvet with hungry, orange tongues.

Ingegärd Lundqvist didn't feel the heat. She didn't feel a damn thing.

Downstairs the fireplace hissed and spat chewing through fresh logs. A half-empty bottle of Château Margaux sat on the sideboard gasping for air. Next to it two crystal She hung from the antique chandelier like a discarded toy, a broken marionette in an eighteenth-century manor house. Her designer dress? Still impeccable. Her blonde hair? Not a strand out of place. Her blue eyes were wide, glassy, staring into a vacuum where a soul used to be. The silk scarf around her neck was a vintage heirloom, her mother's.

It was the only thing in the room that wasn't a lie.

Two glasses. One bore a faint, taunting smudge of lipstick. The other was as pristine as a fresh grave.

Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* drifted through the house. The "Summer" movement. High-energy. Frantic. The perfect soundtrack for a killing.

The note sat on the mahogany desk, pinned beneath a crystal paperweight shaped like a fox. A clever little predator guarding a clever little lie.

I'm sorry. I can't live with what I've done.

The signature was a work of art. A flourish of ink that matched her driving licence, her passport and the deed to the manor house she'd allegedly inherited.

Ingegärd Lundqvist's father had died penniless, rotting in a one-room flat in Norrköping back in '78. The woman dangling from the ceiling hadn't inherited a cent in her life.

Her name was Sonja Pettersson. Forty-three years old. A con artist who could sell ice to an Eskimo and a bridge to a banker. She'd spent her life playing parts but she'd made a fatal mistake three hours ago.

She'd forgotten the first rule of the game. She'd fallen in love.

Now she was swinging in the updraft of a fire she hadn't lit, in a house she didn't own, waiting for a man who had vanished like a ghost in the fog.

The first police cruiser screamed up the drive at 11:47 PM. By then the manor was a funeral pyre.

They found her the next morning. A blacked silhouette dangling among the charred ribs of the house. A judgment in ash.

Detective Inspector Mikael Hansson stood in the ruins, the smell of wet soot clinging to his lungs. He felt a sudden sharp chill, the kind that starts in the marrow. A cold hand touched the back of his neck.

I've seen this before, he whispered to the wind.

"Sir?" his sergeant asked, crunching through the debris. "You say something?"

Hansson didn't look at him. He couldn't take his eyes off the body. "Thirty years ago, Lasse. Another lifetime. The same knot. The same staging."

"You think it's a copycat?"

Hansson felt his heart skip a beat. A dangerous, jagged rhythm. “No,” he muttered. “I think the original is back.”

He just didn’t know how deep the grave went. Yet.

Chapter 1

The rain in Växjö didn't just fall. It punished. It was a relentless, grey weight; the kind of Småland weather that felt like God had left the taps running and walked away from the sink.

Mikael Hansson stood at the jagged edge of the police tape. He watched his team pick through the skeletal remains of the Åkerlund manor. The fire had been a glutton. It had swallowed everything that wasn't stone, iron, or bone. The roof was a memory. The second floor had surrendered to the first in a roar of timber and heat. Now, the air tasted of wet ash and regret, a thick cloying cocktail that went down like cheap, bottom-shelf whiskey.

"Beautiful place," a voice said.

Mikael didn't flinch. He didn't have to turn to know it was her. Yezda Rahimi. Quiet. Sharp. Always letting the silence do the heavy lifting before she deigned to break it.

"Was," Mikael grunted. "Key word is *was*."

Polisassistent Yezda Rahimi yanked her collar tight against the bite of the wind. She was small, dangerously small, if you were the type of idiot who equated height with power. In three years she'd spoken fewer words than any partner Mikael had ever endured, yet she'd closed more files than the rest of the station combined. Her brain was a high-speed processor; her mouth was just the occasional output.

"The body?" she asked.

"Kitchen," said Mikael. "Found her swinging from what was left of the chandelier. The fire started in the lounge, moved like a freight train. If she was alive when the match was struck, she didn't bother to lace up her shoes. She just stood there and let the smoke take her."

Yezda's dark eyes scanned the blackened husk of the house. "Suicide note?"

"On the desk. Tucked under a glass paperweight like it was waiting for the morning mail. Forensics is playing doctor with it now but at a glance? It's a match for her handwriting."

"A glance is just a polite way of being blind, Mikael."

He finally turned. He met her gaze. Even in her late twenties, Yezda had a stare that could strip paint. She looked at a man and didn't see a face; she saw the gears, the lies, and the shadows hiding behind the ribs.

"True enough," he conceded. "Walk with me. There's something you need to see."

He led her through the mud, skirting the perimeter to the rear of the estate. A forensic tent huddled over the patio like a giant plastic mushroom. Inside, the yellow evidence markers glowed like neon teeth against the scorched flagstones.

"Found these twenty meters out," Mikael said, pointing. "Three of them."

Yezda dropped into a lithe crouch. She didn't touch. She just studied. "Cigarette butts. Unfiltered."

“Davidoff,” Mikael added. “Top-shelf. Expensive. Not exactly the brand of choice for a woman who bought her knits at H&M and drove a Volvo that should have been turned into scrap metal a decade ago.”

Yezda looked up, the rain beaded on her eyelashes. “The victim’s car?”

“Impounded. We’re digging into the history.” Mikael pulled out his notebook. It was a battered thing, filled with handwriting that was as surgical as a scalpel. “Ingegärd Lundqvist. Forty-three. Lived here eighteen months. Before that? She’s a ghost. No tax records, no paper trail, no past. She just drifted into Växjö with a suitcase full of cash and enough smiles to convince the neighbours she was an heiress from Uppsala.”

“Nobody in Uppsala has an aunt that generous,” Yezda noted dryly.

“Exactly.”

Yezda stood up, brushing the grit from her trousers. “So, she was a pro. A grifter.”

“I think she was running a very long, very dangerous game. And I think her partner decided it was time

to cash out." He pointed to the markers again. "Our friend stood right here. He smoked three cigarettes. He watched the windows blow out. He watched her dance at the end of that chain. He didn't leave until the screaming stopped."

"That's a lot of narrative for three cigarette butts, Mikael."

Mikael felt the old chill, the one that had nothing to do with the Swedish winter. "Thirty years ago, Yezda. I was a green-as-grass patrolman in Stockholm. My first week. We get a call. Beautiful woman, fortyish, hanging from a chandelier in a penthouse she couldn't afford. Fire in the kitchen. Note on the table. And outside, on the balcony? Davidoff. Unfiltered."

The rain intensified, drumming a frantic rhythm against the plastic tent. Yezda went perfectly still.

"Case closed," Mikael whispered. "The brass called it a suicide. Depression. Debt. A neat little bow. No one looked closer. But her picture stayed on the squad room wall for months. The lead detective, an old-school shark, he couldn't let it go. He'd seen it before. Mid-eighties. Same setup. Same cigarettes. Same 'suicide.'"

His jaw tightened until it ached.

"They called her the Chandelier Lady. It was a legend, a ghost story the old-timers told over coffee. Too clean. Too perfect. Like a stage play that had been performed a dozen times before."

Yezda let the information settle. "How many, Mikael? Truly?"

"Two that we officially flagged. Maybe half a dozen more buried in the archives of three different countries." He looked back at the ruin, the black smoke still curling into the weeping sky. "And today, I think we just found number three."

Chapter 2

Elin Hansson didn't need a badge to read a crime scene. She read the tension in Mikael's shoulders the second he crossed the threshold. It was a language they'd spoken for twenty years.

"Dinner's in the oven," she said. She didn't look up from the kitchen table. She was focused on Lukas and the mountain of math homework between them. "You've got that look, Mikael. The 'I found something' look."

Mikael hung his coat. Precise. Methodical. The ghost of the soldier he used to be. He'd been that way since their Stockholm days, her a sleep-deprived nursing student; him, a man built by army discipline. The police force had given him patience. Elin and Lukas? They'd given him a soul.

But tonight, the soldier was back. The investigator was driving.

“Homicide,” he said. He moved to the stove, his movements stiff. “Fire at the Åkerlund estate. A woman is dead.”

Elin’s pen stopped mid-calculation. She looked up, her eyes narrowing. “The manor on the lake? I heard the sirens screaming last night. The news is calling it a tragic suicide.”

“The news says what it’s told.” Mikael peered into the oven at the casserole. He didn’t see the food. He saw charred timber and the smell of accelerant. “This doesn’t sit right. It feels... staged.”

Lukas was eleven, but he had his father’s eyes. Eyes that looked for the cracks in the story. “What’s wrong with it, Pappa?”

Mikael stiffened. He tried to keep the shadows out of the house. He wanted Lukas to grow up in the light, far away from the grit and the grease of the Växjö precinct. But the kid was sharp. Too sharp to lie to.

“The evidence,” Mikael said, his voice dropping an octave. “It’s a mirror. It matches a case from a lifetime ago.”

"A cold case?" Lukas asked, leaning forward.

"Freezing," Mikael muttered.

Lukas nodded slowly, processing. "In the books, cold cases only break for two reasons. Someone finds a hidden truth, or the killer gets cocky. Which one is it?"

Elin reached over, ruffling the boy's hair with a bittersweet smile. "You and those detective novels. You're going to end up with a trench coat and a caffeine addiction."

"They're educational, Mamma."

"They're giving you ideas you shouldn't have yet." Elin's gaze shifted to Mikael. It was a silent interrogation. *Is this the one? The case that swallows you whole?*

Mikael had no answer. Only the weight in his chest.

Buzz.

His phone vibrated against his hip like a trapped insect. He pulled it out. Yezda.

"Go," Elin said, her voice soft but firm. "Do what you have to do. We aren't going anywhere."

Mikael stepped into the hallway, the shadows of the coat rack stretching like fingers against the wall. He pressed the phone to his ear. “Hansson.”

“Boss,” Yezda’s voice crackled. She sounded wired. High-voltage. “I dug into the archives. The eighties files. I found her. The ‘Chandelier Lady’ case.”

“And?” Mikael’s heart hammered a rhythm against his ribs.

“There was a witness. Someone the original lead ignored. A woman who claimed she saw a man slipping out of the building before the smoke started. Tall, expensive suit, smoking a cigarette like he owned the street.”

Yezda took a breath, the silence on the line heavy with static.

“The witness’s name was Anna Lundqvist.”

The air in the hallway turned to ice. Mikael felt the hair on his arms stand at attention.

“Ingegärd Lundqvist,” Mikael said, the name tasting like ash. “Our victim from this morning. She used that name.”

"Exactly," Yezda said. "She wasn't just a victim. She was the witness who got away forty years ago."

"A coincidence?" Mikael asked, though he already knew the answer.

"I don't believe in coincidences, Boss. Neither do you. They're just patterns we haven't finished drawing yet."

Mikael looked through the doorway. In the kitchen, the golden glow of the lamp bathed Elin and Lukas as they laughed over a fraction. A perfect picture of a life he was sworn to protect.

"No," he said, his voice a low growl. "I don't believe in them at all."

Chapter 3

The basement of the Växjö police station was a tomb. It smelled of ancient paper mould and the heavy, lingering sadness of things the world had chosen to forget.

Yezda had the files splayed out like a winning poker hand. Two from Stockholm in the eighties, a cold one from Malmö in the nineties and the fresh blood from Växjö.

Mikael stood over the table, his eyes darting between the crime scene photos. His stomach did a slow, nauseating roll.

"Look at the staging," he muttered, his voice a gravelly whisper. "Same pose. Body positioned like she's sleeping. And that scarf..."

"Silk. Hermès. Expensive," Yezda finished. Her dark hair was pulled back so tight it made the sharp angles of her face look like a blade. Under the buzzing fluorescent lights she looked lethal. "Tied in that specific knot. The ME in '85 called it 'unusual for a suicide.' I call it a calling card."

"The fire damage too," Mikael added, pointing. "Always in the next room. Close enough to scorch the air, not enough to burn the evidence. And the note. Always the victim's own hand. Always that vague, crushing guilt."

Yezda leaned in, her eyes reflecting the harsh light. "It's not just a signature, Mikael. It's a performance. He's not a killer; he's an auteur. He's creating a gallery of his greatest hits."

"A thirty-year tour," Mikael snapped. He stabbed a finger at the dates. "1985, 1988, 1996, and now this. Four we know of. God knows how many are buried in the gaps."

"The gaps are the scariest part," Yezda said. "What's he doing in the shadows?"

"He's hunting," Mikael said. He felt the familiar, dark heat of a case taking hold of his bones. "He's patient. He finds the right mark. He grooms her. He builds a world for her. Then, when she's at her absolute most vulnerable..."

"When she's head over heels," Yezda whispered. "The Stockholm note... 'I betrayed him. I can't live with what I did to him.' The original squad thought she meant an ex. But she meant *him*. The killer. She fell for the monster and when she saw the teeth, it was too late."

"And he made sure she went to her grave with the secret." Mikael dropped into a wooden chair that screamed in protest under his weight. He rubbed his eyes until he saw stars. "He's a predator who specializes in predators. He targets the fringe, the grifters, the con artists, the women with three names and zero paper trails. He plays the victim. He lets them think they're taking *him* for a ride."

"The ultimate long con," Yezda said, her voice chillingly soft. "Until the mask drops."

"And the curtain falls." Mikael looked up, his jaw set. "We need the truth about Ingegärd Lundqvist. I want her real name, her real ghosts and every name in her contact list. Someone knew her. Someone saw the 'rich old man' she was reeling in."

Yezda was already hammering at her laptop keys. "I'm diving into the money. If she was a pro, she left a digital footprint. Hidden accounts, sudden splashes of cash. I'll find the scent."

"Check the transit logs too," Mikael barked. "A guy this methodical doesn't just show up. He scouts. He stalks. Look for hotels and high-end restaurants in the six months leading up. Look for a silver fox with deep pockets and a taste for silk scarves."

The next three hours were a blur of silence and caffeine. It was the kind of partnership Mikael lived for, no wasted words, just two minds grinding against the same stone. Yezda was the lightning; he was the thunder.

At midnight, the lightning struck.

"Bingo," Yezda said, spinning the laptop around. Her eyes were dancing. "Ingegärd Lundqvist didn't exist until five years ago. Meet Sonja Pettersson. Born

1977, Norrköping. Started her career with credit card fraud at nineteen. Spent eighteen months in the bin, graduated, and went pro."

Mikael leaned in. "What was her game?"

"The classics," Yezda said, scrolling fast. "Romance scams, inheritance plays, the occasional 'exclusive' real estate deal. She was good. Never big enough for Interpol but she lived like a queen."

"And eighteen months ago?"

"She buys a manor house in Växjö. Three million kronor, cold hard cash." Yezda tapped the screen. "Wired from a Cayman account. Dead end."

Mikael felt the hair on his arms stand up. "The big score. The retirement fund."

"Or so she thought." Yezda's expression turned grim. "Three months after she moves in the bleeding starts. Fifty thousand here. A hundred thousand there. By the time she hit the floor, she'd bled out nearly half her fortune."

"Blackmail?" Mikael asked.

"No," Yezda said, meeting his gaze with a look of

pure ice. “Investment. She was giving it to him. The man of her dreams. The man who was going to make her even richer.”

Mikael stared at the victim’s photo, a woman who thought she was the smartest person in the room.

“She wasn’t being blackmailed,” he whispered. “She was being courted.”

Chapter 4

The breakthrough didn't knock. It shattered the door down from a direction Mikael never saw coming.

Elin's call came the next afternoon. Her voice had that jagged, professional edge, the "Code Blue" calm she reserved for the ICU when a soul was halfway out the door.

"Mikael. Get to the hospital. Now."

"Give me a reason, Elin. I'm drowning in paperwork."

"I have a patient. Elderly male. John Doe until an hour ago," she said, her words coming in clipped, rapid-fire bursts. "Brought in after a nasty fall at

home. He's drifting in and out of a concussion, but he's screaming a name you're going to want to hear."

Mikael felt his pulse thrum in his temples. "Who?"

"Sonja. He's terrified for her. He says the man she's with is a monster. A collector. He says this man kills women who make the mistake of loving him. He says he's seen the pattern before."

Mikael didn't say goodbye. He was out the door and hitting the siren before the line went dead.

* * *

The hospital was a sensory assault of lemon bleach and the stale, recycled breath of the dying. Mikael spotted Elin at the third-floor nursing station. She didn't waste time with pleasantries; she just spun on her heel and marched him toward a private room at the end of the corridor.

Inside, the man in the bed looked like a crumpled map of a life lived hard. He was eighty, maybe more, his skin translucent and spotted like parchment. His hands shook a rhythmic, neurological tremor against the white thermal blanket.

"He's been chanting it like a mantra," Elin whis-

pered. “No ID on him, no emergency contact. Just ‘Sonja’ over and over, like a prayer or a curse.”

Mikael approached the bed with the practiced softness of a man who spent his life dealing with the broken. “Sir? Can you hear me? My name is Mikael Hansson. I’m a Police Inspector. I’m here to help but I need a name to go with the face.”

The old man’s eyes, milky with cataracts but sharp with a sudden piercing lucidity, swung toward Mikael. Something shifted in that gaze. A flicker of hope? Or maybe just the recognition of a man who carried a badge.

“Police,” the man rasped, his voice sounding like dry leaves skittering on pavement. “Finally. I thought the devil would get to me before the Law did.”

“Tell me your name, sir.”

“Nilsson. Erik Nilsson.” He struggled to bolster himself against the pillows, his thin chest heaving. “Sonja. Tell me. Is she ...is she breathing? I saw the smoke on the news. The flat in the city. They said a woman didn’t make it.”

Mikael felt the air leave the room. He traded a grim

look with Elin. “Mr Nilsson, what is your relationship to Sonja Pettersson?”

“I know her better than anyone.” A single tear tracked through a deep wrinkle on his cheek. “She’s my daughter. Not by blood, heaven knows she didn’t get her stubborn streak from me, but I raised her. Took her in at sixteen when her mother passed. I gave her a home. She wasn’t an angel, Inspector. She played games. Dangerous games. But she was my girl.”

“And you tried to warn her about this new man?”

“I begged her.” Erik’s hands clawed at the bedding. “Three months ago, she rang me. Sounded like she’d hit the jackpot. A ‘gentleman,’ she called him. Silver-haired, wealthy, sophisticated. She told me she was going to con him, strip him of his assets and vanish. I told her you can’t con a man who owns the world. I told her it would end in blood.”

The old man slumped, his eyes fluttering shut. Mikael leaned in, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. “Erik? Stay with me. What changed?”

“Two weeks ago,” Nilsson whispered, his eyes snapping open, wide with a raw, primal terror. “The tone

changed. She was sobbing. Said she'd looked where she shouldn't have. She'd found a stash of photographs in his hotel suite. Old, grainy photos. Women ...hanging from chandeliers like macabre decorations. Women Mikael recognized from the cold case files years ago. The 'Chandelier Killer' that's what the papers called him back then, wasn't it?"

Mikael's blood turned to ice water. "Did she give you a name, Erik? I need a name."

"She was too scared. Said if I knew, I'd be next on the list. But she described him. Always the same. Tall. Impeccable. Silver hair like a crown. Those expensive suits that cost more than a house. And the cigarettes. Davidoffs. He smoked them like a ritual."

The same brand. The signature of a ghost.

"I told her to run to the station," Erik choked out. "She said she couldn't. Said her own record was too long, she'd end up in a cell. I told her I'd wait for her. I'd visit every day. Just *get out*." He gestured feebly at the wall-mounted TV. "Then the fire. I tried to get to the phone, lost my footing, tumbled down the stairs. And now... now I'm here and she's ...gone."

Mikael gripped the bed rail, his knuckles white. The pieces were clicking into place, a jigsaw puzzle of horrors. "Erik, think. Did she mention a location? A base of operations?"

"She said he was a collector," Nilsson muttered, his voice fading. "Antiques. Art. Rare, leather-bound books. He had a place in the countryside. A 'sanctuary,' he called it. Full of his trophies. And the photographs. She said it was like a shrine. Like he was preserving them, keeping them alive in his own sick way."

"Where, Erik? North? South?"

"The country. Quiet. Secluded. A place where screams don't travel."

It was a needle in a haystack but at least now Mikael knew what the needle looked like.

Mikael stood, placing a steadying hand on the old man's trembling shoulder. "Thank you, Mr Nilsson. You've done more than you know. I'm going to find him. And I'm going to bring him down."

Outside in the hall, Elin grabbed his arm, her eyes searching his. "You believe him? A 'shrine' in the woods? It sounds like a nightmare, Mikael."

"It is a nightmare," Mikael said, his face hardening into a mask of pure, focused intent. "But it's a nightmare with a physical address. Erik is the only person who actually loved Sonja Pettersson. And if we don't find this 'Gentleman' before he picks out his next trophy, the next fire won't just be an apartment. It'll be a funeral pyre for someone else's daughter."

Chapter 5

The conference room at 8 AM tasted like stale coffee and nervous sweat. Outside, the Växjö morning was grey and unforgiving; inside, the air was heavy with the weight of four dead women.

Mikael stood at the head of the long oak table, his eyes bloodshot. Beside him, Yezda looked like a haunting, pale, sharp and twice as focused as anyone else in the room. In front of them sat a gallery of the grim, detectives from three different jurisdictions, men and women who had seen it all but were starting to realise they hadn't seen *this*.

Four cases. Four bodies. Four piles of evidence bags containing the same calling card, Davidoff cigarette butts. Unfiltered. Expensive. Cold.

And then there was the newcomer. The photograph.

It had arrived an hour ago, hand-delivered in a plain manila envelope. No return address. No fingerprints. Just a single black-and-white image that felt like a slap in the face.

"He's playing a game," growled Detective Andersson. He was a Stockholm bulldog, all thick neck and bristling moustache. He leaned forward, his chair groaning under the weight. "Sending evidence to a police station? That's not a mistake. That's a signed confession."

"No," Yezda whispered. The room went quiet. When Yezda spoke, people listened because she sounded like she was reading the killer's mind. "It's a taunt. He's been a ghost for thirty years. He's lived in the shadows while we tripped over our own feet. Now that we're finally sniffing the trail, he wants to lead the hunt."

"Or he's leading us into a brick wall while he vanishes into the fog again," Mikael countered. He took the photo and pinned it to the corkboard with a violent *thwack*. "Meet Margareta Lindholm. Or Mar-

gareta Jönsson, if you want the name on her birth certificate. A high-end con artist, Stockholm, circa 1982. She died in ’85. The file says suicide.”

He tapped the glossy paper. His finger landed right on her smiling face. “We say it was murder. Our guy’s Alpha. His first masterpiece.”

“And now he’s gift-wrapping her for us? Why?” Andersson demanded.

“Pride,” Yezda said, her voice dropping an octave. She walked to the board, her eyes locked on the victims. “These women weren’t just targets. They were trophies. Works of art he’s been curated for three decades in total silence. Imagine that, thirty years of genius and not a single soul to applaud. He’s tired of being the only one who knows how clever he is. He wants an audience.”

“Look at the script,” Andersson said, pointing to the back of the photo. The words *Margareta. 1985. My first.* were visible through a transparent evidence sleeve. “That’s old-school. Proper copperplate. Like something out of a Victorian ledger.”

“Because it is old,” Mikael said. He snatched a photocopy of Margareta’s original suicide note from

1985 and slammed it down next to the photo. “Look. Compare them.”

The detectives crowded around.

“The suicide note? That’s her hand. Hurried, desperate, shaky,” Mikael pointed out, his voice gaining speed. “But the inscription on the photo? Look at the loops on the *M*. Look at the arrogance in the slant. That’s a man’s hand. Elegant. Educated. Patient. He wrote that thirty years ago and kept it in a drawer like a love letter. He’s been holding onto her all this time.”

The silence that followed was suffocating. You could hear the hum of the fluorescent lights and the distant sound of a siren out on the street.

“So, why break cover now?” a voice asked from the back.

Mikael looked at the board, at the faces of four beautiful women who had died believing they’d finally found ‘The One.’ His jaw set.

“Because he’s bored,” Mikael said, his voice a low promise of violence. “He wants us to find him. He’s inviting us to the finale.”

He looked around the room, his eyes burning.

“And I say we don’t keep the gentleman waiting.”

Chapter 6

The hunt for the killer's rural bolthole became a three-week marathon of obsession.

Yezda was a machine. She pulled eighteen-hour shifts, her eyes bloodshot from staring at property deeds, tax liens, and utility grids. She was filtering for a ghost, older men, rural postcodes, cash purchases and enough acreage to bury a secret ...or a body. She flagged hundreds.

Mikael went street-level. He chased the Davidoffs. Unfiltered Davidoffs are a niche habit in Sweden, stocked by only a handful of high-end tobacconists. He hit them all. He showed the crime scene photos to bored clerks. He waited.

At the third shop, the jackpot.

“I know him,” the clerk said, tapping a polished counter. “Distinguished. Silver hair. Always in a suit, even in July. Buys cartons at a time, always cash. A real gentleman.”

“Did he give a name?” Mikael asked, leaning in.

“Said he was a retired professor. Lived out in the sticks. Said he liked to sit on his veranda, smoke and watch the world go still.”

“Did he say where?”

The clerk shrugged. “Somewhere quiet. The kind of place where a man can finally hear himself think.”

It was a scrap. A shadow. But it was a lead.

* * *

Elin was the only thing keeping Mikael from dissolving into the case. She was a nurse; she’d seen men consumed by their work until there was nothing left but a shell and a pension. She forced him to eat. She made him sleep. She reminded him that an eleven-year-old boy needed a father to check his maths, and a wife needed a husband who wasn’t a thousand miles away in his own head.

“You’re breathing down his neck,” she whispered one night. The bedroom was a cavern of shadows. “I can feel it, Mikael.”

“He feels it too.” Mikael stared at the ceiling as if the floor plan of the killer’s house was etched there. “He sent that photo as a challenge. He’s a collector, Elin. He wants to see if I’m worth the shelf space.”

“Are you?”

He looked at her, the woman who’d anchored him through the military, the force and the rot of the world. “I’m going to find out.”

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

The phone shrieked at 3:00 AM.

“Boss,” Yezda’s voice was tight, vibrating with a rare, jagged electricity. “I’ve got him. Map coordinates incoming.”

Mikael was dressed and hitting the ignition before the line went dead.

The house sat at the terminus of a jagged gravel track twenty kilometres outside Växjö. It was a fortress of silence surrounded by a wall of pine. A

two-storey whitewashed wooden structure, handsome and haunting, with a wraparound porch. A thin ribbon of smoke spiralled from the chimney into the freezing air.

Mikael killed the engine a kilometre out. He and Yezda moved in on foot, shadows among shadows. No lights. No sirens. Just the crunch of frost under boots.

"He's in there," Yezda hissed, gesturing to the chimney. "The hearth is warm."

"Or it's a stage set. Stay behind me."

They circled the perimeter. Through a leaded glass window, Mikael saw a flicker. A man, tall, elegant, moving through a library that looked like a cathedral of lost knowledge.

"Wait here," Mikael commanded. "If I'm not out in twenty, call for the cavalry."

"Boss..."

"Do it."

He approached the front door. No lock. The house welcomed him.

Inside, the air was a heavy cocktail of leather bindings, wood smoke and the cloyingly sweet aroma of Davidoffs. Mikael moved with tactical precision, hand hovering over his service weapon. He passed Ming vases, Persian silk and oils that belonged in the Nationalmuseum.

Then he saw the gallery.

Hundreds of photographs. All framed. All beautiful. Women, caught in moments of pure, radiant joy. On the reverse of each frame, a name and a date in a script so elegant it looked like copperplate.

Margareta. 1985. Karin. 1988. Ingegärd. 2024.

The scale of it hit him like a physical blow. This wasn't a spree. It was a lifetime's work.

"Exquisite, aren't they?"

Mikael spun around.

The man stood in the library archway. He was a portrait of refinement, silver hair swept back, a bespoke charcoal suit, a cigarette smouldering between two fingers. He looked like a man who had never felt a moment of guilt in his life.

“Inspector Hansson,” the man purred. “I’ve been expecting you. Your footwork has been... commendable.”

Mikael’s hand closed on his pistol. “You’re under arrest. For the murders of...”

“Am I?” The man cut him off with a languid wave of his cigarette. “Four women. Four suicides. Four closed files spanning three decades. Tell me, Inspector, what is the charge? Being a witness to tragedy?”

“The witness in ’85,” Mikael growled. “She saw you.”

“She saw a ghost. And then she had a very unfortunate car accident. Physics can be so cruel.”

Mikael felt the temperature in the room drop. “You executed her.”

“I managed a risk. There is a distinction.” The man gestured to the wall of photos. “These women were parasites, Mikael. They were con artists, heartbreakers, grifters who fed on the weak. I simply provided them with a mirror. I gave them a mark they couldn’t play. I gave them love ...real, suffocating love. And when they realised the game was over, they couldn’t live with the silence. I just helped them find the exit.”

"You're a monster."

"I'm a curator." The man's eyes flashed with a sudden, terrifying heat. "I gave them the one thing they lacked, an ending that mattered."

Mikael stepped forward, the floorboards groaning. "You're done. Hands where I can see them."

The man smiled. It was the coldest thing Mikael had ever seen.

"I think not."

He reached into his breast pocket. Mikael's thumb flicked the safety...

But the man only pulled out a single photograph. Ingegärd Lundqvist. Radiant. Alive.

"A wager, Inspector. You have twenty-four hours to catch me. If you win, I confess. I give you everything. Every name, every grave." He tucked the photo back over his heart. "But if you fail... there is another woman. She's charming. She's currently trying to swindle a 'lonely professor' out of his estate. She thinks she's winning. She has no idea she's already dead."

"Where is she?" Mikael roared.

The man stepped back toward the porch door, his movements fluid as water.

"Tick-tock, Mikael. The clock is the only judge that matters."

He stepped out into the night.

Mikael charged, boots thundering on the wood. He burst onto the porch, weapon raised...

Nothing. The forest was a black wall. No footprints in the frost. No snapping branches. The silence was absolute, as if the house itself had swallowed him whole.

His radio hissed. Yezda's voice broke the stillness: "Boss? I heard the door. Did you get him?"

Mikael stood in the freezing dark, the ghost of a Davidoff lingering in the air.

Thirty years ago, a detective had stood in this same shadow and let a devil slip away. The cycle was repeating. The game was afoot, and the stakes were a human life.

This time, the devil was going to lose.

Chapter 7

The search for the killer didn't just continue; it rotted. It curdled. It consumed the next eighteen hours like an acid, eating through nerves and caffeine supplies alike.

Headquarters was a converted warehouse on the jagged edge of Växjö. It was a cathedral of high-tension anxiety, humming with the static of fifty officers working a clock that refused to stop ticking.

Mikael stood in the centre of it, the eye of the storm. Yezda was his anchor, hunched over a bank of monitors. Her face was washed out in the blue light of facial recognition software and cross-referenced databases. She was hunting ghosts in the machine.

The man they were after? He was a cipher. A void.

“Tall, silver-haired, distinguished.” That was it. That was the whole damn profile. By the time forensics had kicked in the door of the house, the bird hadn’t just flown, he’d scrubbed the nest. No prints. No DNA. No forgotten mail. The place was as sterile as an operating theatre.

“He knew,” Yezda snapped. Her fingers stuttered against the keys, a rare crack in her icy composure. “He didn’t just bolt, Mikael. He choreographed his exit. While we were playing scouts in the trees, he was folding his shirts and erasing his life.”

“He didn’t erase everything,” Mikael said. He was pacing a tight, frantic circuit of the floor. “He left the gallery. He wanted us to see the collection. He wanted us to look at those faces and know we were too late.”

“The photographs are gone, Mikael. Probably at the bottom of a burning skip by now.”

“No.” Mikael stopped dead. “A man like that doesn’t burn his trophies. He’s a collector, Yezda. Collectors don’t destroy; they preserve. They hoard. He’s moved them to a new vault.”

“Then I’ll find it,” she whispered, her eyes narrow-

ing at the scrolling data. “Storage units, shell companies, offshore leases. If he breathed on a legal document in the last decade, I’ll pull him out of the dark. Just give me time.”

“Time is the one thing we’re out of.” Mikael rubbed the grit in his eyes. “He’s already moved on to the next mark. Another woman. Another con artist who thinks she’s the one holding the cards. She thinks she’s playing him, and she has no idea she’s already in the trap.”

The problem was the sheer scale of the hunt.

The killer had a type, the predators. He hunted the women who lived in the shadows; romance scammers, grifters, sirens with a dozen passports and zero ties. Sweden was crawling with them. Finding one specific woman who had recently charmed a silver-haired stranger was like looking for a single, specific drop of water in the Baltic Sea.

But they didn’t have the luxury of despair.

“Break it down,” Mikael barked, the adrenaline finally overmastering the exhaustion. “Team one, I want every precinct in the country. Scour the files for romance scams involving ‘distinguished’ older men.

Team two, hit the streets. Lean on every known grifter from Malmö to Kiruna. Tell them they get a free pass on their current sheet if they give us the man with the silver hair. Team three, I want the banks. Look for the 'honey traps' sudden influxes of cash, liquidations, marks being bled dry."

Mikael grabbed his coat. His heart was a hammer against his ribs.

"Where are you going?" Yezda asked without looking up.

"Back to the start," Mikael said, his voice grim. "I need to see what we missed in the silence."

Chapter 8

The Stockholm apartment block was a relic.

It stood exactly as it had in the grainy 1985 crime scene photos. Old. Elegant. Slightly faded. It reminded Mikael of a once-stunning woman who had simply stopped trying to impress the world. The bricks held their secrets behind a mask of peeling grey paint.

Mikael stood on the pavement, pulse steady, watching the weak afternoon sun crawl across the facade. He was trying to summon a ghost. Margareta Jönsson.

According to the cold case file, she'd been a knockout. Platinum hair. Eyes the colour of a frozen fjord. The kind of smile that made men reach for their wallets or their hearts.

In the end she'd given him everything. Her trust. Her love. Her final breath.

The current tenant was Linnea. Young. Graphic designer. Trendy. She'd bought the place three years ago, likely thinking she was buying a piece of history. She hadn't counted on the history bleeding through the floorboards.

She was vibrating with nerves when Mikael flashed the shield.

"I'm sorry to intrude, Linnea," Mikael said, his voice low and grounding.

She stepped back, letting him into the living room. It was all IKEA minimalism and "Scandi-chic" now. Clean lines. White surfaces. A far cry from the blood-spattered velvet of 1985.

"It's... it's a beautiful space," Mikael noted, his eyes scanning the perimeter. "You've done a lot with it. Reclaimed it."

"I had to." Linnea hugged herself, knuckles white. She hovered by the door, a rabbit ready to bolt. "The agent... he told me. About the woman. But forty years? I thought the energy would be gone. The price was too good to pass up, and..."

"You're not in any danger," Mikael interrupted gently. He moved to the window, peering down at the street. The vantage point was perfect. "I just need to know about the echoes. Anyone else in the building who was here back then?"

Linnea exhaled, the tension dropping an inch. "Mrs Johansson. Apartment 3B. She's been here since the seventies. She complains about the bins, the noise, the air. But she sees everything."

* * *

Mrs Johansson's flat was a time capsule.

Floral wallpaper. Heavy oak furniture. The cloying, stagnant scent of lavender and ancient dust. At eighty-seven, she was a bird of prey in a cardigan. Sharp eyes. Even sharper tongue.

"Margareta?" Mrs Johansson sank into a wingback chair that looked older than the Swedish monarchy. "Pretty thing. Too pretty for her own skin, if you ask me."

"You remember her well," Mikael prompted, sitting on the edge of a stiff settee.

"Like a bad toothache. Men in, men out. All hours. I told my husband, 'Ove,' I said, 'that girl is a lightning rod for trouble.' You could see the storm in her eyes."

Mikael leaned in. "Did one man stand out? Someone regular? Someone... different?"

The old woman's face tightened. She travelled back through four decades of shadows. "Several. But there was the funeral director."

"A funeral director?"

"No, no. That's just how he dressed. Black suit. Crisp white shirt. Always flowers ...lilies, usually. Handsome man, but cold. Like a statue. Made my skin crawl just passing him in the hall. He had a way of looking *through* you."

"Did you ever get a name? A glimpse of an ID?"

"He wasn't the type to chat, Inspector." She paused, her withered hand trembling slightly. "But I saw his car. A Saab. Dark blue. Gleaming like a polished shoe. I remember because Ove had just bought a Saab, and I was furious that this stranger's car was so much nicer than ours."

Mikael felt the hum. The hunter's itch. "The plate, Mrs Johansson. Tell me you looked at the plate."

She closed her eyes. The room went silent. "Three letters. A... A-E... AEL. Yes. AEL. And numbers. A three? Thirty-something. Thirty-nine? Thirty-seven?" She snapped her eyes open, frustrated. "I'm sorry. My mind isn't what it was."

"It's more than we've had in forty years," Mikael said, standing and taking her hand. It felt like parchment. "Thank you, Mrs Johansson. You've been more than helpful."

* * *

The Stockholm air felt sharper as he hit the pavement. He was already dialling.

"Yezda," he barked when she picked up.

"I'm here, Mikael. What have you got?"

"A ghost with a car. Run the 1985 national vehicle registry. Dark blue Saab. Plate prefix AEL. Likely 300-series numbers."

"That's a narrow window," Yezda's voice crackled with sudden intensity. "I can cross-reference with the Stockholm district."

"Do it now. If we get a hit, find the owner. Find where he lived, where he worked, and if he's still drawing breath."

"And if he is?"

Mikael looked back up at the window of 3B. "Then we give him the funeral he's been dressing for since 1985."

Chapter 9

The hit came back in under an hour. Lightning fast.

Lars Gunnarsson. Born 1938, Uppsala. A pedigree that screamed "establishment." Graduate of Stockholm University, PhD in Art History. He'd spent fifteen years as a curator at the National Museum before hanging up his white gloves in '95. No record. No priors. No digital footprint connecting him to the victims. Just a quiet, respectable life tucked away in a quiet, respectable neighborhood.

And the clincher, a Saab. Dark blue. Plate: AEL 379. Registered to Gunnarsson from '84 to '89.

"That's our ghost," Mikael said.

He stared at the digitised driver's license photo on his monitor. Even decades ago, the man was silver-haired, possessing a face that was both handsome and glacial. It was a mask of cold certainty. The eyes were the worst part, flat, void of warmth, the eyes of a man who had never once questioned his own right to destroy.

"He's been hiding in plain sight this whole time," Yezda breathed, leaning over Mikael's shoulder. Her breath hitched. "A respected curator. He spent his life surrounded by beauty, by history, by things that last. And the whole time, he was planning how to end things."

"He's done hiding," Mikael snapped. He clicked through the database, pulling up the current residency. Uppsala. An old-town address, a stone's throw from the university. "Call it in. Get a tactical team to the coordinates. We're bringing this bastard in before he can blink."

* * *

The house on Skolgatan was a picture-postcard lie.

Three storeys of historic charm, a freshly painted door, and window boxes overflowing with vibrant

flowers. It was exactly where you'd expect to find a retired professor, a man who spent his afternoons sipping tea and debating the merits of the Dutch Masters.

Mikael didn't wait for the team to set the perimeter. He hammered on the door. *Boom. Boom. Boom.*

"Police! Open up!"

Silence. Only the sound of a distant bicycle bell on the cobblestones.

He hammered again, his heart drumming a frantic rhythm against his ribs. "Gunnarsson! Open the door!"

Nothing.

On a grim hunch, Mikael gripped the brass handle. He gave it a twist. The mechanism clicked and the door swung inward with a slow, mocking groan.

Inside, the house didn't just feel empty. It felt hollowed out.

"Clear!" Mikael shouted, moving through the entryway with his weapon drawn, but the word felt ridiculous.

There was no furniture. No rugs. No sprawling bookshelves filled with art history tomes. Not even a stray dust bunny. It was a shell, a stage set that had been struck the moment the final curtain fell.

"He's vanished," Yezda whispered, her voice echoing off the bare, clinical walls. She walked through the kitchen; even the appliances were gone. "He scrubbed the place. He must have started moving the second he finished talking to you at the country house. He knew we'd find the Saab. He wanted us to find it."

Mikael paced the empty rooms, his boots sounding like gunshots on the polished wood. He felt the walls closing in, even though they were bare. Gunnarsson hadn't just left; he'd erased himself.

Then, in the very back of the house, Mikael stopped.

On a single marble windowsill in the master bedroom sat a solitary object. A parting gift.

It was a photograph.

Mikael picked it up with gloved fingers. It was a young woman. Striking. Beautiful. She had cascading dark hair and eyes so deep they looked like ink. He flipped it over.

The handwriting was elegant, precise, and chillingly familiar.

Leila. Soon.

Mikael felt a cold sweat prickle his neck. He looked at his watch. The numbers felt like a countdown to an execution.

"Twenty-four hours," Mikael said, his voice a low, jagged rasp. "He gave us a twenty-four-hour head start. We've wasted eighteen of them chasing a ghost."

He looked at Yezda, the horror reflecting in both their eyes.

"We've got six hours left to save her."

Chapter 10

The clock wasn't just ticking. It was screaming.

Leila.

No surname. No fixed address. Just a hauntingly beautiful face in a grainy digital file and the cold, hard certainty that somewhere in Sweden, she was walking straight into a meat grinder.

The task force room didn't just wake up; it detonated. Chairs scraped against the floor like gunfire. Yezda's fingers danced across her keyboard, a blur of motion as she fed the photo into the belly of every beast the state owned, passports, driver's licenses, Interpol's red notices.

Three hours later, the beast roared back.

“Got her!” Yezda shouted, her eyes lit with the fever of the hunt. “Leila Hassani. Thirty-one. Born in Tehran, Swedish resident since twelve. No priors, but her bank accounts are a work of fiction. Looks like she inherited the family business.”

Mikael leaned over her shoulder, his breath hitching. “What business?”

“The long con. Her mother was a legendary grifter in Iran. Seems Leila is a chip off the old block.” Yezda tapped a key, bringing up a ghost company. “Last known location: Malmö. She’s been posing as a ‘financial consultant’ for a firm that has as much substance as a cloud.”

“She’s a predator,” Mikael muttered, staring at the screen.

“Maybe,” Yezda countered, her voice dropping an octave. “But even predators get hunted. Look at these phone records. Three weeks ago, she started burning up a line to a pre-paid cell. The calls are long, Mikael. Three, four hours. Midnight sessions. The kind of calls you make when you’re losing your heart.”

“Or when you’re being reeled in by a master,” Mikael snapped. “Where is she?”

"The trail goes cold in Ystad. Twelve hours ago, her phone took a dirt nap. Either she switched it off to be 'romantic,' or someone did it for her."

Ystad. A postcard-perfect town on the southern coast. Cobblestone streets, medieval charm, and a thousand places to hide a scream. It was the kind of place a wealthy man took a woman he wanted to dazzle.

Or the kind of place where a body could slide into the Baltic Sea and never be found.

"Get moving!" Mikael barked. "I want every hotel, every boutique B&B, and every five-star hideaway in Ystad on my screen five minutes ago. And get the bird fueled up. We're going south. Now!"

* * *

The helicopter ride was a blur of vibrating steel and adrenaline. Below, the Swedish countryside was a tapestry of emerald and gold, looking far too peaceful for a world where people killed for sport.

Mikael's phone vibrated hard against his thigh. He snatched it up.

"Talk to me, Yezda!"

"I've got them," she said, her voice tight with a terrifying urgency. "The Sankt Jörgen. It's a boutique hotel in the old town. High-end, very private. They've got a 'Lars Andersson' and his wife in the bridal suite. Description is a match, tall, silver hair, looks like old money. The woman with him? Young, dark hair, looks like a movie star."

"When do they leave?"

"Checkout is tomorrow morning. If they make it that long."

Mikael looked out the window. The red roofs of Ystad were rushing up to meet them, huddled together like secrets. The harbour glinted like a serrated blade in the fading light.

Somewhere in that maze of history, a woman was sipping champagne with a monster. She thought she was winning the ultimate prize. She didn't realise she was the main course.

"Faster," Mikael whispered to the pilot, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. "God help her, just fly faster."

Chapter 11

The Sankt Jörgen didn't just whisper "wealth"; it screamed it in a cultured, indoor voice. All exposed oak beams, hand-polished antiques and the sort of understated luxury that acted as a magnet for the ultra-rich, the ones who paid extra for the privilege of being invisible.

Mikael leaned against a marble pillar in the lobby, nursing a cold espresso. He tried to project the vibe of a bored tourist waiting for a late check-in but his pulse was a drumbeat against his ribs. Across the floor, his team moved like ghosts through the shadows of the velvet curtains and mahogany alcoves.

A static pop hissed in his earpiece. "He's a no-show in the suite," a voice whispered. "But the nest is warm, Mikael. Luggage is still on the rack. The woman's vanity is covered in expensive lotions and silk. She's coming back. They both are."

"Then we turn into statues," Mikael muttered, his gaze sweeping the room. "Hold your positions. We take him the second he breathes the lobby air."

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked with agonizing precision. Minutes bled into hours.

He watched the parade of the privileged, young lovers entwined in a post-dinner glow, elderly couples moving with synchronized grace, and frantic businessmen barking into gold-plated phones. None of them had the shadow. None of them were the ghost he'd been chasing for a lifetime. And none of them were Leila.

At 9:00 PM sharp, his phone vibrated against his thigh. Elin.

"Status?" Her voice was a calm facade, but Mikael could hear the tectonic plates of her anxiety shifting underneath.

"Still a stakeout. The target's in the wind, but his gear is here."

"Watch your back, Mikael. This man isn't just a killer; he's a survivalist. He's been outrunning the devil for forty years. He won't go down easy."

"I'm not looking for an easy win," Mikael said, his eyes locked on the revolving glass door. "I'm looking for an ending."

"Wait ...Lukas is here. He's been diving into the archives. He says he's found a thread."

The line crackled as the phone changed hands. "Pappa? You there?"

"I'm here, Lukas. Talk to me."

"I went back to the '80s files. The cold cases everyone gave up on. I started looking at the crime scene photos, not just the bodies but the details. All the victims? They weren't just wearing silk scarves. They were wearing *nooses*."

Mikael felt a cold needle of intuition prick his spine. "Go on."

"The Medical Examiner's reports mentioned the knots were 'unusual,' but they never specified why. I cross-referenced the photos with a maritime manual. Pappa, those weren't suicide knots. They were professional hitches. Specifically, a figure-eight follow-through."

The air in the lobby suddenly felt thin.

"It's a sailor's knot, Pappa," Lukas's voice rose with excitement. "It's what you use to secure a heavy line on a vessel under pressure. It doesn't slip and it doesn't break. The killer didn't just stage those scenes; he signed them."

A boat.

Mikael's head snapped toward the floor-to-ceiling windows. Beyond the manicured gardens of the hotel, the black expanse of the harbour stretched out, dotted with the swaying mast-lights of multimillion-pound yachts. A floating city of escape routes.

"Lukas, you're a bloody genius," Mikael breathed, his heart hammering a new rhythm.

"Just bring him in, Pappa. Don't let him get to the water."

But Mikael was already moving, his legs pumping as he burst through the heavy oak doors and into the cold night air. The hunt wasn't in the lobby anymore. It was on the docks.

Chapter 12

The Ystad harbour was a graveyard of secrets. Quiet. Too quiet. At this hour, the fishing boats didn't just bob; they sighed against their slips, tired of the day's haul. The pleasure craft were dark, hulking skeletons against the black Swedish sky.

Mikael moved like a ghost along the docks. His Glock was an extension of his arm, heavy and cold. His eyes trained to find the monster in the closet, scanned every shifting shadow.

Behind him, the team was a symphony of heavy boots and hushed radio static. They were spreading out, a net closing in on a shark. They probed the warehouses and the ink-black water but Mikael knew. He felt it in his gut.

Then he saw her.

The White Swan

The motor yacht was a forty-foot slice of ego. Sleek. Expensive. A "look at me" boat in a town that preferred to stay hidden. Lights glowed in the cabin like a jack-o'-lantern's grin.

On the deck, two silhouettes stood frozen in time. One was tall, topped with a shock of silver hair that caught the moonlight. The other was dark-haired. Fragile.

Leila.

She was leaning against the rail, her gaze lost in the Baltic. The man stood behind her—not touching, just hovering, like a predator waiting for the perfect moment to strike. He looked serene. He looked like a saint.

"...beautiful," the man purred. His voice was velvet draped over a razor blade. "The sea at night. So peaceful. So final."

"It's lovely." Leila's voice was a dream. She was miles away, wrapped in the lie he'd sold her. She had no idea she was standing on her own coffin.

Mikael didn't wait. He vaulted onto the deck, the wood thudding under his boots. He levelled the Glock.

"Lars Gunnarsson! Police! Step away from the woman. Now!"

The silver-haired man turned. It wasn't the flinch of a guilty man; it was the slow, choreographed rotation of an actor taking a bow. A thin, mocking smile danced on his lips.

"Inspector Hansson," Lars said. He sounded bored. "You're early. I suppose I should be impressed by your persistence. It's a very Swedish trait, isn't it?"

"I said move! Get your hands where I can see them!"

Leila whirled around, her eyes wide, her face a mask of fractured glass. "Mikael? What is this? Lars, who is this man?"

"Lars Gunnarsson is a butcher, Leila," Mikael spat, his pulse drumming a frantic rhythm in his ears. "He's killed four women. They all looked just like you. And you were slated to be the grand finale."

“That’s... that’s insane. Lars is an art curator. He’s gentle. He...”

“He’s a ghost,” Mikael stepped into the light, the barrel of the gun never wavering. “He’s been playing you for weeks. He didn’t meet you by accident. He studied you. He knew your job, your routine, your favourite wine. He didn’t fall for you, Leila. He targeted you.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Leila looked at Lars. Really looked at him. The “gentle curator” was gone. In his place stood something cold and ancient.

“Is it true?” her voice broke, a tiny, jagged sound.

Lars Gunnarsson let out a long, theatrical sigh. It was the sound of a man disappointed by a clumsy waiter.

“I would have made it a masterpiece, my dear,” he whispered. The warmth had evaporated from his eyes, leaving only grey ice. “Peaceful. Elegant. You wouldn’t have felt a thing. It’s a shame, really. You had such a lovely neck.”

Leila stumbled. She recoiled as if he’d physically struck her, scrambling toward Mikael.

And then Lars moved.

He wasn't a retired academic. He was a lightning bolt. In one fluid, terrifying motion, he vaulted over the mahogany rail. He didn't jump; he soared.

Splash.

Mikael was at the rail in a heartbeat. He didn't think about the temperature. He didn't think about his gear. He just dove.

The Baltic hit him like a concrete wall. The cold was a physical blow, screaming into his lungs, stealing his breath. He surfaced, gasping, spinning in the dark water.

"Lars!" he bellowed.

Nothing.

The harbour returned to its eerie stillness. The boats bobbed. The water rippled. But the silver-haired monster was gone, swallowed by the black throat of the sea.

Mikael was alone in the dark. And he knew, with a sinking horror, that this wasn't the end. It was just the intermission.

Chapter 13

The search lasted three days. Three days of hollow hope and expensive machinery.

Divers clawed through the silt of the harbour floor, blind and shivering. Boats stitched a frantic grid across the sound, their engines a low mourning thrum. Overhead, helicopters banked hard, sweeping the coastline with the cold, neon eye of thermal imaging.

Nothing.

The man was a ghost. He'd been swallowed by the dark Atlantic as if he'd been made of nothing but saltwater and spite.

Leila Hassani was tucked away in protective custody, though "protection" felt like a joke. The only thing she needed saving from was the wildfire burning in her own chest. She was furious, furious at Lars for being a monster, furious at herself for being a mark and furious at a world that let a man like that breathe.

She gave statement after statement until her voice was a rasp. She described the curve of his jaw, the chill in his eyes, the way he'd almost squeezed the life out of her.

But the truth was a bitter pill: she knew nothing. Lars was a masterpiece of fiction. No real name. No paper trail. Just forty years of practice in the art of being nobody.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

Mikael stood on the edge of the dock, the wood groaning under his boots. The sun was bleeding out over the horizon, staining the water a bruised purple. Yezda stood a pace behind him, a shadow in a leather jacket.

"He's fish food, Mikael," she said. Her voice was clipped, trying to anchor the moment in reality. "Nobody survives that long in these currents. Not at this

temperature. His heart would have packed it in twenty minutes after he hit the surface."

"Maybe." Mikael didn't turn around. His voice was as flat as the sea. "Or maybe he had a Zodiac tucked under a pier. Maybe he had a rebreather and a plan he'd been polishing for a decade. He fed us just enough to keep us hungry, then stepped out the back door while we were still at the table."

"You're giving him too much credit," Yezda countered, though her eyes were scanning the waves just as hard as his. "He's a man, not a god."

Mikael thought about the trail of bodies. Forty years of blood. Forty years of being the smartest guy in the room. He thought about that photograph on the windowsill, a final, mocking *checkmate*.

"I think," Mikael said, his heart a heavy stone in his chest, "that until I see a bloated corpse on a steel table, he's still breathing. And something tells me the sea isn't going to give him up."

The silence stretched out, long and cold.

"What now?" Yezda asked.

Mikael turned his back on the sunset. He turned his back on the spot where a monster had slipped into the deep.

"Now? We go home. We sit in the dark. We keep our eyes peeled." He started toward the car, his pace brisk, restless. "We pray he gets sloppy. We pray he thinks he's won."

"And if he doesn't?" Yezda called out. "If he's gone for good?"

Mikael didn't answer.

He didn't have to. The cold wind blowing off the water said it for him.

Chapter 14

Six months. In the police world, that's an eternity. It's long enough for memories to fade, for paperwork to yellow, and for the higher-ups to decide that a ghost isn't worth the budget.

Växjö was quiet. Too quiet.

Mikael sat in his car, the heater humming against the biting Swedish chill. Life had moved on, indifferent to the itch under his skin. The Lars Gunnarsson case was a "closed file." No body, no crime scene, no justice. Just a splash in the dark and a mountain of boxes sitting in a basement gathering dust.

He'd tried to be the man his family deserved. He'd helped Lukas with his geometry. He'd held Elin, breathing in the scent of her hair, trying to drown out the smell of stagnant lake water that haunted his dreams. He did the job. He processed the shoplifters and the Friday-night drunks.

But every time he closed his eyes, he saw Gunnarsson's face. That look. It wasn't the frantic mask of a drowning man. It was the calm, terrifying smirk of a man checking out of a hotel.

He's playing us, Mikael told himself every morning. *He didn't die. He just exited stage left.*

Mikael didn't stop. He couldn't. He became a ghost hunter in his own time, chasing digital shadows through property deeds and offshore accounts that led to nowhere. He was looking for a needle in a haystack—only the needle was invisible and the haystack was the size of Europe.

Until the phone screamed on his nightstand at 2:03 AM.

"Boss. You need to get here. Now."

Yezda's voice wasn't just tired. It was brittle. Like glass about to shatter.

* * *

The station was a tomb at that hour, lit only by the sickly hum of fluorescent overheads. Mikael found Yezda in the old war room. She looked like she'd aged

five years in six months. She didn't look at him; she just pointed at the table.

There it was. A single, glossy photograph. High-resolution. Professional.

A woman. Mid-forties, elegant, radiating the kind of effortless grace that suggested old money and better wine. She was laughing at something off-camera, her eyes bright with a life that was about to be snuffed out.

Mikael flipped it over. His blood turned to ice.

The handwriting was neat. Precise. The script of a man who took pride in his work.

Ingrid. Soon.

"He's alive," Yezda whispered, her voice a ragged sliver of sound. "The bastard is actually alive. He's been watching us this whole time, hasn't he? He's been waiting for the dust to settle."

Mikael felt a jolt of adrenaline, pure, cold and electric. The lethargy of the last six months evaporated in a heartbeat. The predator was back in the light.

"He's not just alive, Yezda," Mikael said, his voice

dropping to a low, dangerous growl. “He’s bored. He wants an audience again.”

He looked at the woman, Ingrid and then back at the door. The hunt wasn’t over. It was just beginning.

“Get the laptop,” Mikael barked, the old fire back in his eyes. “We find out who she is before the sun comes up. We find her, we find him, and this time? This time, he doesn’t get to swim away.”

Chapter 15

Ingrid.

No last name. No location. Just a face on a grainy screen, a cold-blooded threat, and the sickening, absolute certainty that somewhere in Sweden, a woman was breathing her last hours.

The search didn't just consume them; it became their heartbeat.

Yezda slammed the photograph through every database she could breach, her fingers dancing a frantic rhythm across the keyboard. Nothing. No passport matches. No driver's licenses. No immigration paper trail. She scoured the dark web, social media shadows, and digitized news archives until her eyes burned.

Ingrid was a vacuum.

"She's like the others," Mikael said, his voice a low rasp. He stared at the image as if he could force the pixels to speak. "She's a ghost, Yezda. A woman who lives in the cracks of the system."

"Ghosts don't bleed, Mikael," Yezda snapped, the pressure starting to fracture her composure. "And she's going to. How do we find someone who doesn't exist?"

Mikael leaned in, his shadow stretching long against the office wall. "The same way *he* did. We stop looking for a person and start looking for a predator. We need to understand her hunt."

They dove back into the graveyard of old cases, picking apart the bones of the victims' lives. The patterns emerged like bruises on skin. Margareta Jönsson? A romance scammer who bled lonely men dry in Stockholm's gilded penthouses. Karin Lindberg? A shark in real estate who'd charmed the elderly right out of their family legacies. Sofia Ek? A 'financial consultant' whose only true expertise was the alchemy of turning a client's savings into thin air.

Different cities. Different decades. Different faces.

But they all shared one fatal mistake: they had all tried to play a silver-haired man who looked like the ultimate payday. They thought he was the mark. They couldn't have been more wrong.

"He's not just killing them," Yezda whispered, the realization chilling her. "He's *vetting* them. If we can figure out his scouting grounds, we find his current prey."

It was the ultimate needle-in-a-haystack nightmare. But they had a weapon the killer didn't: the full, terrifying weight of the state's digital eye.

For seven days, sleep was a luxury they couldn't afford. They lived on bitter coffee and adrenaline, cross-referencing police complaints with offshore bank spikes. They built a digital net, filtering for every high-level female grifter in the country—the ones who changed names like coats and lived by the art of the steal.

Then, at 3:00 AM, the screen blinked. A hit. Buried in a dusty fraud file from Gothenburg.

"Found you, you bitch," Yezda breathed, her voice thick with triumph.

Ingrid Bergman. Current alias. Real name: Ingrid Holmgren. Age: fifty-two. Convicted of grand fraud in 2005. She'd done three years in the cage, stepped out of the gates and vanished into the ether. No address. No job. But the bank deposits? They were there, shadowy, consistent and very, very large.

"Where is she, Yezda? Talk to me," Mikael urged, already hovering over her shoulder.

"Last pinged in Alingsås. A quiet little bed and breakfast. She checked in three days ago." Yezda's eyes narrowed as she read the digital register. "She isn't alone. She's with a 'gentleman' in an expensive suit. Matches Lars's description to a T."

Mikael didn't wait. He was already grabbing his coat, his face set in stone. The hunter was about to become the hunted.

"Get the tactical team on the line. Tell them to move," Mikael barked, his hand on the door. "We're going to Alingsås. And Yezda? Tell them to drive like hell."

Chapter 16

The engine of the Volvo hummed a low, anxious rhythm as the miles to Alingsås disappeared beneath the tyres. Three hours. For Mikael, it wasn't a drive; it was a rehearsal in a theatre of shadows.

Every minute was a chess move. He played out the opening, the mid-game, and the bloody endgame. He wouldn't underestimate Lars Gunnarsson again. He'd done that once, and the cost had been measured in lives and sleepless years.

Not tonight, Mikael thought, his knuckles white against the leather steering wheel. *This time, the rabbit doesn't see the snare until it snaps.*

* * *

The bed and breakfast was a postcard of Swedish innocence, a creaky, mustard-yellow house on a street so quiet you could hear a heart break three blocks away. It was the kind of place where people came to forget the world, or hide from it.

Mikael stepped onto the porch, his boots echoing like a countdown. His team, ghosts in tactical gear, melted into the treeline, sealing the exits.

The owner was a woman in her sixties, flustered and smelling of lavender and nerves. She looked at Mikael's ID and her face paled.

"Ingrid Bergman?" Mikael asked, his voice a low rasp. "And her companion. Are they here?"

"They... they checked in three days ago," she stammered, twisting her apron. "But they're out. Dinner at the bistro. They haven't come back yet."

Mikael leaned in, his eyes hard as flint. "The man. I need a description. Don't leave out a single hair."

The woman fluttered, a faint, traitorous blush creeping up her neck. "Oh, he's... he's tall. Distinguished. Beautiful silver hair, like a film star. So polite, so charming. The kind of man... well, the kind of

man you'd want to take you to dinner. A real gentleman."

Mikael felt a cold familiar bile rise in his throat. Always the same description. The wolf always wore the finest wool.

* * *

They waited.

The surveillance van was a cramped, sweaty oven of anticipation. Hours ticked by. One by one, the lights in the neighbouring houses died out, leaving the street to the shadows and the hunters.

Then, at exactly midnight, the twin beams of a car's headlights sliced through the dark.

Mikael gripped his binoculars. His heart was a hammer.

A sleek black sedan pulled to the kerb. The door opened, and *he* stepped out. Tall. Silver hair catching the streetlamp's glow. He moved with a grace that made Mikael's skin crawl.

"Target in sight," Mikael whispered into his comms. "Hold your positions. Wait for my lead."

Then Ingrid climbed out. She was radiant. She was laughing, her head tilted back, caught in the gravity of the man's smile. She looked happy. She looked safe.

She was walking hand-in-hand with a monster, and she was dreaming.

"Look at her," whispered Berg, Mikael's second-in-command. "She has no bloody clue."

"Nobody ever does," Mikael snapped. "Until the teeth sink in."

The couple reached the front porch. The man reached for his keys, leaning down to whisper something into Ingrid's ear. She giggled. It was a sound of pure, unprotected joy.

Mikael felt the lightning bolt of adrenaline hit his spine. He raised his hand.

"Now," he hissed. "Go! Go! Go!"

Chapter 17

Lars Gunnarsson saw them.

For one frozen, crystalline second, their eyes locked across the rain-slicked tarmac. Mikael's eyes met the killer's. In that cold, aristocratic face, Mikael saw a ghost he hadn't expected.

Fear.

It was a beautiful sight.

Then Gunnarsson bolted. He shoved Ingrid Holmgren with a brutal, dismissive force, sending her sprawling onto the pavement. He lunged for the black Volvo.

Mikael was faster.

He'd spent six months preparing for this heartbeat. Six months of 5:00 AM sprints, pushing his lungs until they burned and his legs turned to lead. He blurred across the street, a predator intercepting a scavenger. He cut Gunnarsson off inches from the car door.

"Police! Don't you bloody move, Lars! Hands where I can see them!"

Gunnarsson stopped. He didn't cower. He turned slowly, wearing a look of mild annoyance, those empty, arctic eyes settling on Mikael.

"Inspector Hansson," he said. His voice was a velvet rasp, calm enough for a Sunday brunch. "I must confess, I didn't think you had it in you to find me again. You've grown quite quick."

"You're under arrest, Gunnarsson. For the murders of Margareta Jönsson, Karin Lindberg, Sofia Ek, Ingegärd Lundqvist, and the attempted murder of Ingrid Holmgren. You have the right to remain silent—"

"Do I now?" Lars let out a soft, melodic chuckle. "I don't think so, Inspector. I think silence is the one thing I can no longer afford."

His hand dipped toward his pocket. Mikael's finger tightened on the trigger, the world narrowing down to the front sight of his Glock.

Do it, Mikael thought. *Give me a reason.*

But Gunnarsson only pulled out a silver case. A Davidoff. Unfiltered. He lit it with a steady hand, the flame illuminating the sharp planes of his face. He took a long, luxurious drag, exhaling a plume of grey silk into the night air.

"Forty years," Lars mused. "Forty years of work and not a soul ever brushed my shadow. Until you. Tell me, purely for my own edification, how did you bridge the gap?"

"The photograph," Mikael snapped. "Your ego got loud, Lars. You couldn't resist the vanity of the post-mark."

Lars nodded slowly, a dark appreciation dawning on him. "Ah. Pride. My Achilles' heel. I wanted you to know I was still out there, Inspector. Still curated. Still adding to the gallery."

"The gallery is closed."

"Is it?" Lars took another pull of the cigarette. "You

see, Mikael ...may I call you Mikael? ...that's where your logic fails you. My collection is complete. It has been for a decade. Every woman I've ever 'loved' is preserved, static, immortalised in my mind. You can lock me in a concrete box for the rest of my natural life. It won't matter. My collection is safe."

"Where are the originals, Lars? The photographs. Where are they hidden?"

"In a place your sirens will never reach. Under the nose of someone you'd never dream of questioning." Lars flicked the ash onto the wet street. "But, because you've been such a delightful adversary, a truly worthy opponent, I'll leave you with a parting gift. A final shard of the mirror."

Mikael didn't blink. The weapon stayed level, rock steady.

"The woman in that photograph. The one I sent to your flat." Lars's eyes danced with a sudden, wicked electricity. "That isn't Ingrid Holmgren. It never was. Look closer next time, Inspector. She's someone else entirely. Someone you've known for a very long time."

A cold finger of dread traced a line down Mikael's spine. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Lars didn't answer. He simply smiled, a wide, terrifyingly affectionate grin and raised his hands in a mock gesture of surrender as the blue lights of the backup units flooded the street.

"You'll piece it together. You're brilliant, Mikael. That's exactly why I chose you."

"Chose me for what?" Mikael barked.

"For the Game." Lars's voice was a whisper now, lost in the wail of sirens. "Forty years is a long time to play alone. I got bored. I needed a partner who could actually see the board." He looked at Mikael with something disturbingly like fatherly pride. "You've been magnificent. Truly. I couldn't have asked for a better ending."

Uniformed officers swarmed. They slammed him against the car, ratcheted the cuffs tight, and read him his rights in a frantic staccato. Mikael watched the taillights of the lead cruiser fade, feeling a hollow ache in his chest.

Not triumph. Dread.

Someone you've already met.

He turned his head toward the curb. Ingrid

Holmgren was there, draped in a grey police blanket, her body racking with tremors of pure shock. She was alive. She was breathing.

But as Mikael looked at her, really looked at her, the realization hit him like a physical blow.

He didn't know this woman. He'd never seen her before tonight.

If she wasn't the woman in the photo... then who was?

And more importantly, where was she now?

Chapter 18

The interrogation had become a war of attrition, and after seventy-two hours, the walls were closing in, not on the suspect but on the men and women hunting him.

Lars Gunnarsson sat in the cramped interview room with the serene, terrifying patience of a monk. He looked like a man who had nowhere else to be and nothing left to fear. He played the detectives like a master cellist, offering up scraps of information when it suited him and snapping the strings when it didn't. He'd confessed to the murders, all of them. Dozens of women, a trail of blood stretching back decades. But on the one thing that mattered most, he was a stone wall.

He wouldn't say where the photographs were.

"They're safe," he whispered, his voice as smooth as polished bone. "With someone who loves me. Someone who'll never, ever betray me."

Mikael felt the bile rise in his throat. He'd tried reason. He'd tried threats. He'd tried appealing to the cold, dead husk where Lars's soul should have been. Nothing. Lars just sat there, untroubled, as if they were discussing the afternoon forecast instead of the lives he'd snuffed out.

"You said something," Mikael growled, leaning across the table until he could smell the stale coffee on the killer's breath. It was day three, and Mikael's nerves were frayed to the breaking point. "The night we took you down. You said the woman in the photograph wasn't Ingrid. You said she was someone I'd already met."

Lars's eyes sparked. A flicker of genuine amusement danced in those pale, watery depths. "Did I really? My, my."

"Who is she, Lars?"

"A gift, Inspector. Think of it as a final puzzle for a man who thinks he's so very clever." Lars leaned in,

his voice dropping to a conspiratorial rasp that made the hair on Mikael's neck stand up. "She's been there all along. Standing right in front of you. And you, the great detective? You never even blinked."

"What are you talking about? What woman?"

Lars's smile was a slow, oily thing. He settled back in his chair, the game won. "I think we're done here. I'd like to speak with my solicitor now. Bring me some tea, would you? Two sugars."

The interview was over.

* * *

Mikael stormed out of the room, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. He felt sick, frustrated, and dangerously close to losing his grip. He found Yezda in the darkened observation area, her face lit by the cold glow of the monitors.

"He's playing us, Mikael," she said, her eyes never leaving the man behind the glass. "He's a narcissist. He's trying to keep the spotlight on himself by throwing out distractions."

"Maybe." Mikael stared at the silhouette of Lars Gunnarsson. "Or maybe he's telling the truth for the

first time in his life. Maybe there's another woman. A victim we've missed."

"We've accounted for every file, Mikael. Every photograph, every alias, every name in his ledger..."

"Every name we *know* about," Mikael snapped, then softened his tone with a weary sigh. "What if there's one we don't? What if he sent us a photo of someone who isn't a target? Someone... ordinary?"

Yezda turned to him, her brow furrowed. "Why? Why would a predator like him bother with 'ordinary'?"

"Because he's not just a killer, Yezda. He's a collector. And collectors don't just want objects. They want pieces of a life." The gears in Mikael's head began to turn, clicking into place with a sickening thud. "They collect people. People who *matter* to them."

"You think he's holding someone? A hostage?"

"No. It's worse than that." Mikael's mind raced through the archives. "The photographs. He said they were safe with someone who *loves* him. Someone who would never betray him."

“He was never married,” Yezda countered quickly. “No siblings, no children. We vetted his entire history. He’s a ghost.”

“Then who is she?” Mikael whispered, staring at his own reflection in the glass.

He didn’t have an answer. Not yet. But he could feel the clock ticking. And somewhere out there, a ghost was waiting for him to find her.

Chapter 19

The search for the ghost woman didn't just stall; it died a slow, agonizing death.

For seven days, Mikael and Yezda lived in a tomb of paper. They sifted through every scrap of evidence, every yellowing photograph, every cryptic note salvaged from Lars Gunnarsson's hollowed-out life. They hammered on the doors of his past. They interrogated museum colleagues who remembered a shadow in a tweed jacket. They tracked down a woman he'd dated in the nineties, a brief cold spark.

"Charming," she told them, her eyes drifting as if trying to recall a dream. "But distant. Like he was looking through me at something else."

By day eight, the air in the squad room tasted like stale coffee and defeat.

"Forty years," Yezda snapped, slamming a folder onto the desk. The sound echoed like a gunshot. "No friends. No family. No lovers. He lived in a vacuum, Mikael. It's not natural."

Mikael didn't blink. He was staring at the evidence board, at the gallery of the dead. Lars's 'loves.' "He didn't want an audience, Yezda. He wanted a shrine. He loved these women the only way a monster can, by stopping time. If they stayed alive, they changed. If they died, they were perfect forever."

"Fine," she sighed, rubbing her temples. "But the photographs he bragged about? He said they were safe. Who is the guardian of the graveyard?"

The breakthrough didn't come from a detective. It came from the bloodline.

Lukas had been hovering on the periphery of the case like a moth to a flame. He was reading the files when Mikael wasn't looking, his young mind absorbing the darkness. It made Mikael's skin crawl with pride and a cold, sharp terror.

"Pappa?"

Mikael looked up from a sea of bank statements. Lukas was standing in the doorway, looking smaller than his years.

"What is it, Lukas? It's late."

"Lars said the photos were with someone who loves him," the boy said, his voice steady. "Someone who'd never betray him. But what if 'someone' isn't a person? What if it's a *place*?"

Mikael felt the first prickle of electricity at the base of his neck. "Talk to me."

"He was a curator, right? He spent his life hiding things in plain sight. Making sure things lasted forever. What if he didn't give the photos to a friend? What if he gave them to an institution? A library? Or a museum?"

The realization hit Mikael like a freight train. *The ultimate hiding place.*

"Yezda!" Mikael was on his feet, his chair skidding across the floor. He scrambled for his phone, his fingers fumbling with the keypad. "Get up. I need a deep dive on every archive Lars Gunnarsson ever

touched. Galleries, university collections, private bequests. Look for anything he moved out of his house before he retired."

It took three days of bureaucratic hell. Three days of "please hold" and "the archivist is at lunch."

Then, the hit.

The National Museum in Stockholm. 1995. The year Lars Gunnarsson stepped out of the light and into his quiet retirement. He hadn't just packed a box; he'd made a legacy. A donation titled *Portraits of Women*. Anonymous subjects. Untraceable origins. The museum had filed them away in the dark, climate-controlled bowels of the archives, a gift from a respected colleague.

"We've got him," Mikael whispered, grabbing his coat.

"Stockholm?" Yezda asked, already halfway to the door.

"Stockholm," Mikael confirmed. "He didn't leave his secrets with a woman. He left them with history."

The train couldn't move fast enough.

Chapter 20

The National Museum's basement was a tomb. A temperature-controlled, silent, fluorescent-lit vault where the past went to be filed away in acid-free boxes. It smelled of ozone, old dust and the peculiar, sterile scent of paper preserved against the rot of time.

Karin, the archivist, led the way. She was young, efficient, and blissfully unaware of the monster whose legacy she was guarding. To her, Lars Gunnarsson was just another name on a donation form.

"It's a compact collection," Karin said, her heels clicking like a metronome on the polished concrete. She stopped at a heavy steel unit and pulled a flat file drawer. "Fifty photographs. All portraits of women. Honestly? The work is stunning. Very intimate. Very..."

She paused, searching for the word. Her voice dropped to a respectful whisper.

"Loving."

Mikael stepped forward. His stomach did a slow, nauseating roll.

He looked down at the prints. They were exactly what he'd expected. The same faces that had haunted his nightmares for months. Margareta. Karin. Sofia. Ingegärd. They stared back at him with frozen eyes, trapped in silver halide.

But there were dozens more. Faces he didn't recognise. Women whose disappearances had never hit the headlines. Women who had simply slipped out of existence, deleted from the world without a ripple.

Yezda's breath hitched in her throat. She sounded like she'd been punched. "He gave them to the museum," she hissed. "He hid them in plain sight. Not on a gallery wall, but... here. In the heart of the establishment."

"It's the perfect sanctuary," Mikael said. His voice was a rasping blade. "An institution that values 'art' above all else. A place that would never betray a

donor. He didn't just kill them, Yezda. He archived them."

They began the grim work. One by one. Face by face. Cataloguing the dead. Each print had a name on the back, scrawled in that elegant, looping handwriting—the script of a man who thought himself a poet rather than a butcher.

The count climbed. Forty-seven.

Forty-seven women. Forty years of silence. Forty-seven lives snuffed out by a man who claimed to love them.

Then, at the very bottom of the drawer, Mikael saw it.

The final photograph.

His breath caught in his lungs. His heart didn't just skip a beat; it stopped dead in his chest.

This wasn't a posed portrait. It was a candid. A snapshot of a woman in a hospital corridor, dressed in blue scrubs, laughing at something just out of frame. She looked radiant. She looked kind. She looked like home.

"Elin," Mikael choked out.

It was his wife. Alive. Happy. Totally unaware of the lens tracking her from the shadows.

Mikael turned the photo over. His fingers shook so violently he nearly dropped it. There, in that familiar, sophisticated hand, were the words that turned his world to ash:

Elin. The Inspector's wife. My masterpiece.

Chapter 21

The world didn't just tilt; it gave way.

Mikael Hansson stared at the photograph, his vision blurring at the edges. It was Elin. His Elin. But the eyes staring back at him were younger, framed by the cursive scrawl of a dead man.

My masterpiece.

"When was this taken?" The words felt like shards of glass in his throat.

Karin, the archivist, adjusted her spectacles, her fingers dancing nervously over the donation ledger. "The collection was accessioned in 1995, Inspector. Everything arrived in a single shipment."

The number hit him like a physical blow. Thirty years ago. Back then, Elin was just twenty-one, a nursing student navigating the cold, bright streets of Stockholm. Long before their first date. Long before the rings, the mortgage, and the quiet life they'd built.

"He knew her," Yezda said. Her voice was low, clinical, the sound of a profiler closing a trap. "He knew her before you even existed to her, Mikael. He wasn't just looking. He was *studying* her."

Mikael's pulse hammered in his ears, a frantic, uneven rhythm. Lars Gunnarsson, the celebrated curator, the man who spent forty years cataloguing the worst of humanity, had turned his lens on a girl who spent her weekends studying anatomy and volunteering at clinics.

"She doesn't fit the profile," Mikael snapped, his voice rising. "Gunnarsson collected monsters. Con artists. Predatory sociopaths. Elin is... she's the light. She's kind. She's the person people turn to when the world breaks."

"Exactly," Yezda countered, her eyes hard with pity. "Maybe after four decades of staring into the abyss, Gunnarsson wanted to own the sun. Every collection needs a centrepiece, Mikael. A masterpiece."

“A masterpiece,” Mikael whispered. The word felt like a death sentence.

Then his phone vibrated in his pocket. A frantic, buzzing insect. He snatched it out, pressing it to his ear without checking the ID.

“Hansson.”

“Pappa?”

The voice was small. Trembling. Lukas.

Mikael’s heart stopped. “Lukas? What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Pappa, there’s a man here,” the boy whispered, the sound of his breath ragged against the receiver. “He’s at the front door. He says he’s an old friend of yours from the museum. He says he has a gift for Mamma.”

Ice water surged through Mikael’s veins. “Lukas, listen to me. Do not open the door. Run to the bathroom, lock yourself in, and...”

“He’s already inside, Pappa. He had a key.”

The line didn’t just go quiet. It died. A flat, hollow silence that screamed louder than any siren.

Chapter 22

The five-hour burn from Stockholm to Växjö? Mikael did it in three. The engine screamed in protest, a mechanical howl that matched the one inside his chest. Blue lights sliced through the Swedish night, a strobe-light nightmare on high-speed repeat. Beside him, Yezda was a blur of motion, her fingers dancing over her phone, braying orders at local dispatch, hunting for Elin, hunting for a ghost.

Nothing.

No answer at the house. No answer on Elin's cell. The neighbours' lines? Dead air.

When they hit the gravel driveway, the house was a black tomb.

Mikael was out of the door while the tires were still spitting stones. Boots hitting the ground. Glock in his hand. The metal felt cold, but his blood was boiling. His heart wasn't just beating; it was a sledgehammer against his ribs, suffocating him.

The front door was ajar. A jagged yawn of shadow. Elin never ...*never* left that door unlocked.

He kicked it wide. "Elin! Lukas!"

The house swallowed his voice. Silence, thick, heavy and tasting of copper, was the only reply.

He cleared the rooms like a machine. A lethal, terrified machine. Kitchen: Empty. The scent of lingering coffee, mocking him. Living room: Empty. Lukas's room: The boy's books were a chaotic spill on the floor. A story interrupted. A life paused mid-sentence.

He hit the master bedroom. Empty. The basement. A concrete void. The attic. Nothing but dust and old memories.

They were gone.

Mikael stood in the center of the living room, the mundane artefacts of his life suddenly looking like

relics of a lost civilisation. Lukas's schoolbooks. Elin's knitting, the needles still pierced through a half-finished sleeve of blue wool. A jigsaw puzzle on the coffee table, a thousand pieces of a picture that would never be finished.

He felt a cold, oily wave wash over him. Helplessness. A detective's poison.

Then, his phone shrieked.

An unknown number. His thumb hit the screen before the first ring finished.

"Talk to me," Mikael rasped.

"Hello, Inspector." Lars Gunnarsson. The voice was like silk over a razor blade. Calm. Cultured. Deeply, unnervingly pleasant. "I assume you've received my little memento? The photograph in the museum? A touch of the dramatic, I know, but the classics never go out of style."

"Where are they?" Mikael's voice wasn't a question; it was a vow of execution. "If you so much as breathe on them, Lars..."

"Breathe on them? Inspector, please. You wound me." A soft, melodic chuckle echoed through the

line. “I don’t break things. I curate them. I love them. Your wife... I’ve loved her for thirty years. Ever since that hospital. She was a vision of mercy, wasn’t she? So gentle. So fundamentally different from the poor broken things I usually... collect. I knew then. She was the crown jewel.”

“Thirty years?” Mikael’s grip on the phone tightened until his knuckles turned white. “You’ve been stalking her for three decades?”

“Stalking is such a grubby word, Mikael. I was *waiting*. Cultivating the moment. And then, you arrived. The perfect complication. A worthy opponent. A man with enough intellect to actually make the hunt interesting.” Another laugh, this one sharper. “Don’t you see the beauty of the architecture here? The plan was always this: Find the hunter, draw him into the labyrinth, and then—at the moment of his greatest pride—strip away his soul.”

“Tell me where they are.”

“Somewhere beautiful, Inspector. Somewhere the world can’t reach them. A sanctuary you’ll never find.” A pregnant pause. The sound of a match striking. “But I’m a sportsman. I’ll give you one final move. A championship round. Find them before the

clock strikes midnight and you can have your little family back. Fail...”

The silence on the other end grew teeth.

“Well. Let’s just say my collection is about to receive two very exquisite, very permanent additions.”

Click. The line went dead.

Mikael jerked his wrist up. His watch face blurred for a second before snapping into focus.

8:00 PM.

Four hours. The hunt was on. And the devil had a head start.

Chapter 23

The task force reassembled in hours. A swarm of suits and tech. Mikael barely saw them. He was a ghost in his own home, haunted by two names: Elin. Lukas.

Yezda was a machine. She worked three phones at once, eyes darting across monitors, hunting for a digital footprint. A ping. A breadcrumb. Anything.

"Nothing," she spat, slamming a handset down. "Phones are dark. They're either at the bottom of the Baltic or in a lead box. He's ghosting us, Mikael."

Mikael didn't stop pacing. His boots hammered a frantic rhythm into the floorboards.

“He’s had thirty years, Yezda. Thirty years of rotting in his own head, planning this encore,” Mikael said, his voice a jagged edge. “He’s not just hiding. He’s staging. Lars Gunnarsson doesn’t do ‘random.’ Every move is a brushstroke.”

Yezda stood, her chair scraping the floor like a scream. “Then give me a target. Think! What’s the map in his head? What places are etched into his soul? Or yours?”

Mikael stopped. He forced his lungs to take air. *Think. Don’t feel. Think.*

Gunnarsson was a collector of tragedies. He worshipped beauty, permanence, and the cold weight of legacy. He wouldn’t shove them into a damp basement. He needed a pedestal.

“The museum?” Yezda asked, hopeful.

“Too loud. Too many witnesses,” Mikael countered.

“The old house? The summer cottage?”

“Sterile. We’ve crawled over every inch of those places. He knows that.”

Then, a flash. Cold water. The smell of diesel and salt. The night Lars had vanished into the black maw of the harbour six months ago. The police had scoured the docks, but the man had simply evaporated.

"The boat," Mikael whispered. "He didn't just jump. He had a vessel waiting. Something private. Something rigged for the long haul."

Yezda's fingers flew across her keyboard. Maps of the coastline bloomed across the screens. "Mikael, there are thousands of private docks between here and Malmö. It's a needle in a haystack made of needles."

"No," Mikael said, his mind racing. "Not a marina. He's a hermit. He needs isolation. Silence."

Then, a small ghost spoke. Lukas's voice, clear as a bell in Mikael's memory: *Look, Dad. A figure-eight follow-through. It's for the big sails.*

The boy had been so proud of that knot.

"Lars knows how to sail," Mikael said, the realization hitting him like a physical blow. "He's not just a passenger; he's a mariner. He knows the hidden corners. The inlets. The places the charts forget."

"The Stockholm archipelago," Yezda breathed, looking at the screen. "Thirty thousand islands. We don't have the man-power to kick down every door in the Baltic."

"We don't search the islands," Mikael said, grabbing his coat. His heart was a hammer against his ribs. "We find the one that matters. Where would he take his 'final collection'? Somewhere the story began."

He saw it in his mind's eye. The black-and-white crime scene photo from thirty years ago. The first girl. The one who had broken Lars's heart before he decided to break the world.

"Margareta Jönsson," Mikael said. "The first victim. The one he claimed to love."

Yezda's eyes widened. "She grew up on a rock in the outer circuit. Uninhabited for forty years. It's barely a dot on the GPS."

"It's not a dot to him," Mikael bolted for the door, his blood turning to ice. "It's a shrine. He's taking them to Margareta's island. And if we're not there in an hour, he's going to finish the set."

Chapter 24

The rotors screamed. 10:00 PM. A black blade cutting through a blacker sky.

Mikael sat in the jump seat, the vibration rattling his teeth, his pulse a frantic staccato against his ribs. Below, the Swedish archipelago was a graveyard of jagged shadows and ink-pool water. Every so often, a pinprick of light from a lonely cottage winked out—a dying eye in the dark.

He checked his Sig Sauer. Locked. Loaded. He checked it again.

He'd left Yezda behind to run the board. She was the only soul he trusted to hold the line, but being the one *not* in the line of fire was its own kind of hell. His family was out there. His blood. His breath.

"Target sighted," the pilot barked over the comms, banking hard. "Far side of the ridge. No power, but there's a motor yacht anchored in the cove. Looks like the one from Ystad."

Mikael leaned into the glass, eyes narrowed. There it was. A ghost ship on a glass sea. And nestled in the pines, a cabin, a rickety, silver-grey coffin of a building with a single amber glow bleeding from a window.

"Drop me on the north face," Mikael commanded, his voice like grinding stones. "I'm going in quiet."

The chopper hovered, kicking up a hurricane of pine needles and salt spray. Mikael didn't wait for the skids to touch. He dropped, three metres of pure adrenaline and hit the mossy earth running.

The cabin was old. Ancient. The logs were weathered to the colour of bone. He moved like a shadow among shadows, breath held, finger light on the trigger. He reached the window.

Inside.

Two figures. One small, one slight. Lukas and Elin. They were huddled on a moth-eaten sofa, shivering but whole. *Alive.*

And there, in a high-backed chair by the hearth, sat Lars Gunnarsson. He wasn't a monster from a nightmare; he was a man enjoying a gallery opening. He watched them with a terrifying, predatory stillness. The Great Collector.

Mikael's instinct screamed... *Wait. Call the tactical team. Let the professionals breach.*

But the clock was a ticking bomb. Midnight was a heartbeat away, and he didn't know what kind of grand finale Lars had scripted.

He didn't knock. He kicked the door off its hinges. *CRACK.*

Lars didn't flinch. He slowly turned his head, a thin, oily smile stretching his lips. "Inspector. You're remarkably punctual. Or perhaps a trifle early."

"Let them go, Lars," Mikael growled, the red dot of his laser sight dancing on the old man's forehead. "Right now."

"Or what? You'll paint the walls with my brains?" Lars chuckled, a dry, papery sound. "Go ahead. My life is a completed volume. My collection is curated, tucked away where the world can never touch it. But if you pull that trigger... well, do you like games,

Mikael? Is there a pressure plate under that sofa? A chemical timer in the floorboards? Or perhaps just a beautiful, poetic end I've choreographed for them?"

Mikael's knuckle went white against the trigger guard. His heart was a hammer. *Is he bluffing? Is he insane enough to rig the whole place?*

"Pappa."

The voice was small. Trembling, but clear. Lukas. The boy was looking straight at his father, ignoring the madman in the chair.

"Don't listen," Lukas said, his eyes burning with a sudden, fierce intelligence. "He's lying, Pappa. He's been checking his watch every two minutes. He's waiting for something that isn't happening. He just wants you to be afraid."

Lars's smile didn't just flicker. It died.

Mikael looked at his son. Eleven years old. Scared out of his wits, but standing tall. The boy wasn't a prize. He was a person. A brave one.

Mikael lowered the muzzle. Just an inch.

"He's right, isn't he, Lars?" Mikael stepped into the

room, his voice dropping to a deadly, intimate whisper. "There is no trap. No grand design. No timer. There's just a pathetic, hollow shell of a man who's spent forty years trying to steal what he could never earn."

Lars stood up, his face darkening. "You know nothing of my work. Nothing of the preservation of beauty..."

"I know you're a failure," Mikael snapped. "I know you killed those women because you couldn't make them love you. You couldn't even make them stay. So you turned them into things. Objects. Dead things don't leave, do they, Lars?"

Mikael took another step, invading the killer's personal space.

"Look at us," Mikael gestured to Elin and Lukas. "This is the one thing you can't collect. A family. Real love. The kind that doesn't need a cage or a taxidermist. You can kill us right now, and you'll still be the loneliest man on God's green earth. You'll die empty."

The silence in the cabin was suffocating. The fire popped, a sharp, violent sound in the stillness.

Then, Lars Gunnarsson laughed.

It wasn't the cold, theatrical cackle of a villain. It was the wheezing, broken sound of a man who had finally seen the punchline of his own life.

"You're right, Inspector," Lars said, his shoulders sagging as if an invisible weight had finally crushed them. "God help me, you're absolutely right. I have been a spectacular fool. A curator of ghosts."

He stood, his hands open and empty. He looked at Elin then at Lukas, his eyes glassy and distant.

"Take them," Lars whispered. "Take them back to your world of light and messy, uncurated feelings. I'm finished."

Mikael didn't relax his grip. "Where are you going?"

Lars walked toward the shattered door, his gait heavy. He paused on the threshold, looking out into the freezing night. "I believe it's time for the collector to be collected. Don't you think?"

He stepped out into the dark. He walked toward the cliff's edge, where the black sea met the black sky.

Mikael started to follow, his boots heavy on the wood...

“Mikael. Stop.”

Elin’s voice. She was standing now, holding Lukas tight. Her eyes were hard, fixed on the doorway. “Let him go. It’s over.”

Mikael stopped. Through the open door, he watched the silhouette of Lars Gunnarsson reach the precipice. The man stood for a heartbeat, looking out at the vast, indifferent ocean. Then, without a word, he stepped into the void.

A distant splash. Then nothing.

The wind howled through the cabin, but for the first time in weeks, Mikael could breathe.

Chapter 25

Three days.

That's how long it took for the Baltic Sea to spit him out. They found Lars Gunnarsson's body washed up on a jagged stretch of coastline ten kilometres from the island. The medical examiner didn't even break a sweat.

The verdict? Accidental drowning. A slip, a crack to the skull, a final breath of salt water. Case closed. No foul play. No mystery. Just a pathetic old man making one final, fatal mistake.

The system was satisfied.

Mikael knew better.

He closed his eyes and saw it again. That final flicker in Lars's eyes. It wasn't the wide-eyed terror of a dying man. It was something deeper. Something quieter.

The collector was finally collected.

* * *

They buried him in a patch of dirt that God had forgotten. An unmarked grave at the ragged edge of an Uppsala cemetery. No headstone. No flowers. Just grey sky and damp earth.

Mikael stood there, a ghost at a ghost's funeral. He watched the plain wooden box sink into the dark. He waited for the rush of triumph. The surge of relief.

He felt... hollow.

"He was a monster, Mikael."

He didn't turn. He knew the voice. Yezda. She'd driven all the way from Växjö, a shadow trailing him even now.

"He slaughtered dozens of women," she said, her voice like flint. "He shattered lives like they were

glass. He doesn't deserve a single tear. Not from you. Not from anyone."

"Tears?" Mikael shook his head, his voice a dry rasp. "He doesn't deserve the dirt they're throwing on him."

He turned away, unable to watch the first shovelful of soil hit the lid.

"But he was human, Yezda. That's the horror of it. At the very end, when he had the knife at the throat of everything I love... he let go. Why? I'm staring at that hole in the ground and I still don't have the answer."

Yezda stepped in front of him, forcing him to meet her gaze. Her eyes were hard, certain.

"The 'why' doesn't matter," she snapped. "The 'what' does. You beat him, Mikael. You didn't need a gun. You didn't need a trap. You used the one weapon he couldn't comprehend. A family that actually loved you."

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

The walk back to the car felt like a mile. Every step was a heavy reminder of what he'd almost lost.

He thought of Elin. He could still smell the scent of her hair.

He thought of Lukas. His boy. Eleven years old and braver than any man Mikael had ever served with.

They were his world. The ordinary, messy, beautiful life that Lars Gunnarsson had tried to pin down like a butterfly under glass.

"He never got it," Mikael said, the realization finally clicking into place like a deadbolt. "Love. Family. To him, they were trophies. Things to be possessed. Controlled. Kept in a basement so they could never change."

Yezda opened the car door, the hinges groaning in the cold. "And how does it work, in your version?"

Mikael felt a smile tug at his lips. It felt strange. New.

"You don't hold on," he said. "You let it breathe. You wake up every damn morning and you *choose* it. Even when it's falling apart. Even when you're terrified of the dark."

He looked back at the cemetery one last time.

"That was Lars's real failure. Love isn't a collection, Yezda. It's a choice you make until your last breath."

Epilogue

Six months. A lifetime in the world of Småland.

The Swedish summer had finally arrived in Växjö, bleeding into the landscape with a sweetness that felt almost unearned after the winter we'd endured. The sun hung low and stubborn in the sky, refusing to set, casting a honey-coloured glaze over the world.

I sat on the porch, my boots up on the railing, watching Lukas. He was sprinting across the grass, locked in a high-stakes game of tag with the scruffy, wire-haired mutt we'd pulled from the shelter. We called him 'Bosse.' He was fast, enthusiastic and smelled perpetually of wet earth. He was exactly what this family needed.

From the kitchen, the scent of Elin's garlic chicken drifted through the screen door. The clinking of silverware. The hum of the radio.

Ordinary. Beautiful. Everything.

A dark sedan crunched up the gravel driveway. Yezda.

She stepped out of the car, looking… different. It took me a second to process it. No crisp trousers. No blazer. Just jeans and a charcoal t-shirt. She looked less like a clinical instrument of the state and more like a woman in her twenties.

"Boss," she said, her voice catching the evening breeze.

"Yezda." I kicked a chair out for her. "Grab a seat. There's a cold one in the cooler."

She sat, popping the cap off a beer with a practiced flick of the wrist. She didn't drink right away. She just stared at the label.

"I thought you'd want the final word," she said, her eyes fixed on the horizon. "The museum didn't put up a fight. They donated the photographs, all forty-seven of them, to the families. The burials are be-

ing coordinated now. Those women aren't exhibits anymore, Mikael. They're daughters again. Sisters. Mothers."

I felt a knot in my chest loosen. "Good. It's about time they went home."

"And the paperwork?" I asked.

"Bound, signed and filed in the archives," she said, finally taking a sip. "Lars Gunnarsson is officially recorded as the monster behind every single one. The media has found a new tragedy to chew on. The circus has left town."

I watched Lukas tumble into the grass, Bosse licking his face. "Is it really over, Yezda? A thing like that... does it ever actually close?"

She turned to me. Her dark eyes, usually so analytical, so detached, looked raw. "For the files? Yes. For us? We're the ones left holding the ghosts, aren't we? But at least the ghosts have names now. That's where the healing starts. Or so the textbooks say."

We sat there for a long beat, the only sound the distant shout of a neighbour and the rustle of the birch trees.

“I’ve been playing back what you said,” Yezda said suddenly. Her voice was smaller now. “About love. About it being a conscious choice you make every morning when you wake up.”

“And?”

“And I think I’ve been a coward,” she admitted. The confession hit the air like a gunshot. “I spent four years getting a psychology degree so I could map out the human heart without ever having to feel my own beat. I used observation as a shield. If I was watching the world, I didn’t have to live in it.”

I looked at her, really looked at her. The ice was melting. “The case cracked the shield, didn’t it?”

“It shattered it,” she whispered. “I realized I don’t want to be a spectator anymore, Mikael. I’m tired of being the girl who understands everyone but knows no one.”

She stood up, brushing the invisible dust from her jeans, looking steadier than she had in months. “I just wanted to say thank you. For dragging me into the light.”

Before I could find the right words Lukas spotted her.

"Yezda! Yezda, look! Bosse found a toad!" He was charging toward us, a whirlwind of blonde hair and scraped knees. "Come play! You're on my team!"

Yezda hesitated. The old Yezda would have offered a polite nod and an excuse about a briefing. But this Yezda looked at the boy, then at the dog and actually *laughed*.

"You're going to lose, Lukas!" she shouted, vaulting off the porch and sprinting into the golden light.

I watched them go. The detective and the boy. The shadow and the sun. Inside, the screen door creaked open.

"Mikael! Dinner's on!" Elin called.

I stood up, breathing in the cooling Småland air. Lars Gunnarsson had tried to turn life into a collection of still, silent images. He wanted to freeze time, to own it, to kill it.

He failed.

Because life isn't a photograph. It's messy, it's loud and it's moving too fast to ever truly catch.

I walked toward the house, toward the laughter and the light, feeling like the luckiest man alive.

The End

All the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Växjö Vanishing

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A Polisinspektör Mikael Hansson of Växjö PD case.

VÄXJÖ VANISHING

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

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